shall think of women. The open life brings health and vigor, strength and animal vitality, and these clamor for play. The cold of the still clear days is no more biting than the fierce memories and appetites which charge through the brain at night. Passions intensify with imprisonment, recollections come to life, longings grow vivid and wild. Thoughts change to realities; the past creeps close, and dream figures are filled with blood and fire. One remembers pleasures and excesses, women's smiles, women's kisses, the invitation of outstretched arms. Wasted opportunities mock at one.

Cantwell began to brood upon the Katmai girl, for she was the last, her eyes were haunting and distance had worked its usual enchantment. He reflected that Mort had shouldered him aside and won her favor, then boasted of it. Johnny awoke one night with a dream of her, and lay quivering.

"Hell! She was only a squaw," he said half aloud. "If I 'd really tried—"

GRANT lay beside him, snoring, the heat of their bodies intermingled. The waking man tried to compose himself, but his partner's stertorous breathing irritated him beyond measure; for a long time he remained motionless, staring into the gray blur of the tent-top. He had played out. He owed his life to the man who had cheated him of the Katmai girl, and that man knew it. He had become a weak, helpless thing, dependent upon another's strength, and that other now accepted his superiority as a matter of course. The obligation was insufferable, and—it was unjust.

As time passed, the men spoke less frequently to each other. Grant joshed his mate roughly, once or twice, masking beneath an assumption of jocularity, his own vague irritation at the change that had come over them. It was as if he had probed at an open wound with clumsy fingers.

Cantwell had by this time assumed most of those petty camp tasks which provoke tired trailers, those humdrum duties which are so trying to exhausted nerves, and of course they wore upon him as they wear upon every man. But once he had taken them over he began to resent Grant's easy relinquishment; it rankled him to realize how willingly the other allowed him to do the cooking, the dish-washing, the fire-building, the bed-making. Little monotonies of this kind form the hardest part of winter travel, they are the rocks upon which friendships founder and partnerships are wrecked.

Out on the trail, Nature equalizes the work to a great extent, and no man can shirk unduly; but in camp, inside the cramped confines of a tent pitched on boughs laid over the snow, it is very different. There one must busy himself while the other rests and keeps his legs out of the way if possible. Sometimes men criticise and voice longings for better grub and better cooking. Remarks of this kind have been known to result in tragedies, bitter words and flaming curses—then, perhaps, wild actions, memories of which the later years can never erase.

It is but one prank of the wilderness, one grim manifestation of its silent forces.

Had Grant been unable to do his part, Cantwell would have willingly accepted the added burden; but Mort was able, he was nimble and handy, he was the better cook of the two, in fact; he was the better man in every way—or so he believed. Cantwell sneered at the last thought and the memory of his debt was like bitter medicine.

His resentment—in reality, nothing more than a phase of insanity begot of isolation and silence—could not help but communicate itself to his companion, and there resulted a mutual antagonism, which grew into a dislike, then festered into something more, something strange, reasonless yet terribly vivid and amazingly potent for evil. No man who has not suffered the manifold irritations of such an intimate association can appreciate the gnawing canker of animosity like this. It was dangerous because there was no relief from it. The two were bound together as by gyves; they shared each other's every action and every plan; they trod in each other's tracks, slept in the same bed, ate from the same plate. They were like prisoners ironed to the same staple.

Each fought the obsession in his own way, but it is hard to fight the impalpable, hence their sick fancies grew in spite of themselves. Each began to criticise the other silently, to sneer at his weaknesses, to meditate derisively upon his peculiarities.

On more than one occasion the embers of their wrath were upon the point of bursting into flame, but each realized that the first ill-considered word would serve to slip the leash from those demons that were straining to go free, and so managed to restrain himself.

THE CRISIS came one crisp morning when a dog team whirled around a bend in the river and a white man hailed them. He was the mail-carrier, on his way out from Nome, and he brought news of the "inside."

"Where are you boys bound for?" he inquired, when greetings were over and gossip of the trail had passed.

"We 're going to the Stony River strike," Grant told him.

"Stony River? Up the Kuskokwim?"

"Yes!"

The mail-man laughed. "Can you beat that? Ain't you heard about Stony River?"

"No."

"Why, it 's a fake—no such place." There was a silence; the partners avoided each other's eyes. "MacDonald, the feller that started it, is on his way to Dawson. There 's a gang after him, too, and if he 's caught it 'll go hard with him. He wrote the letters—to himself—and spread the news just to raise a grub stake. He cleaned up big before they got on to him. He peddled his tips for real money."

"Yes!" Grant spoke quietly. "Johnny bought one. That 's what brought us up from Seattle. We went out on the last boat and figured we 'd come in from this side before the break-up. So—fake! By God!"

"Gee! You fellers bit good." The mail-carrier shook his head. "Well! you 'd better keep going now; you'll get to Nome before the season opens. Better take dog fish from Bethel—it 's four bits a pound on the Yukon. Sorry I did n't hit your camp last night; we 'd a' had a visit. Tell the gang that you saw me." He shook hands ceremoniously, yelled at his panting dogs and went swiftly on his way, waving a mitten on high as he vanished around the next bend.

The partners watched him go, then Grant turned to Johnny and repeated:

"Fake! By God! MacDonald stung you."

Cantwell's face went as white as the snow behind him, his eyes blazed.

"Why did you tell him I bit?" he demanded harshly.

"Huh! *Did n't* you bite? Two thousand miles afoot; three months of hell, for nothing. That 's biting some."

"*Well!*" The speaker's face was convulsed and Grant's flamed with an answering anger. They glared at each other for a moment. "Don't blame me. You fell for it, too."

"I—" Mort checked his rushing words.

"Yes, *you!* Now, what are you going to do about it? Welsh?"

"I 'm going through, to Nome." The sight of his partner's rage had set Mort to shaking with a furious desire to fly at his throat, but fortunately he retained a spark of sanity.

"Then shut up, and quit chewing the rag. You—talk too damned much."

Mort's eyes were bloodshot; they fell upon the carbine, under the sled lashings, and lingered there, then wavered. He opened his lips, reconsidered, spoke softly to the team, then lifted the heavy dog whip and smote the malamutes with all his strength.

The men resumed their journey without further words, but each was cursing inwardly.

"So! I talk too much," Grant thought. The accusation stuck in his mind and he determined to speak no more.

"He blames me," Cantwell reflected bitterly. "I 'm

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The Indian led, pulling at the end of a rope; Grant strained at the sled and hoarsely encouraged the dogs; Cantwell stumbled and lurched in the rear like an unwilling prisoner